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ABSTRACT

Although self-directed learning (SDL) has been promoted by businesses as being needed by managers, traditional business schools have not promoted this type of learning. In addition, some adult learners are not ready for SDL, and some subjects (such as accounting) are not suitable for SDL. The concept of self-directed learning readiness (SDLR) can be used on a continuum to guide thinking about the application of SDL to business subjects once the learner is psychologically equipped to succeed at SDL. The Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS), which now contains 58 items, can be used to determine the readiness of individual learners. Learning contracts should be used for organizations that wish to use both teacher-directed and learner-directed (SDL) education as part of their worker and manager development programs. The learner contracts should spell out what is to be learned, how it will be learned, how the learning will be documented, and how the learning will be evaluated. A comparison of American and Japanese managers at a General Motors plant in Japan showed that the American managers were more oriented toward learning for career's sake, while the Japanese managers favored learning for its own sake and studied a variety of subjects not related to business. The question for the future is, should American companies encourage, and pay for, employees to study non-business subjects they find interesting? If it is believed that self-directed managers are crucial to organizational success, it will be necessary to change business schools and management development programs to reward self-directed learning. (Contains 27 references.) (KC)

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ED 447 266

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING READINESS AT GENERAL MOTORS JAPAN

Michael A. Beitler

Over the past several years, I have developed models to guide my research and consulting in organizational learning and management development. While the literature on organizational learning and management development is exciting and inspiring, it typically leaves the practitioner with a blank sheet of paper to stare at on Monday morning. Since I believe tools, as well as ideas, are needed to build something, I will share some "tools" practitioners can use in this chapter.

I will begin this chapter by briefly discussing the models I have used in practice in the U.S. I will then share the findings of my work at General Motors Japan. I will conclude this chapter by discussing the implications of my findings for organization development (OD) and organizational learning (OL) practitioners. It is clear to me, our American-made OD and OL models need modification to be successful in international settings.

BUSINESS SCHOOLS & BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS

For many years, American business journals have trumpeted the importance of managers being self-directed. American business

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schools have preached the importance of managers acquiring technical skills, people skills, and conceptual skills. Unfortunately, these business schools have done little to promote or encourage a self-initiated/self-directed approach to acquiring new skills. American business schools continue to follow a teacher-directed, syllabus-driven format of instruction, while corporations are looking for young managers who are self-directed.

SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING (SDL)

Over the past twenty-five years, an impressive body of literature has developed concerning the potential and practice of SDL (Tough, 1979; Knowles, 1975; Long, 1990).

Tough (1979) speaks of *independent learning*--learning, for the most part, independent of teachers and institutions. Tough's approach to learning, with little or no institutional support, is also shared by the advocates of *distance learning* (i.e. Garrison, 1987). Authors, such as Tough and Garrison, have written about self-initiated, self-directed learning outside of institutional settings for many years. But, is it not possible to promote self-initiated, self-directed learning within the walls of business schools and business organizations?

Knowles (1975) speaks of self-directed learning in institutional settings. Knowles, who taught graduate students at Boston University and North Carolina State University, found lecturing to *older* students (in adult education) ineffective because of the adults' unique backgrounds and needs. Knowles decided to write a learning contract with each of his students. The contract was an agreement between teacher and student;

it detailed what would be learned, and how it would be learned (Knowles, 1986). I will discuss my use of learning contracts in business organizations later in this chapter.

While I found the work of Tough and Knowles to be inspiring, I had two reservations concerning the use of self-directed learning. Based on my own teaching experience, I realized:

1) some intelligent adults are not psychologically equipped to succeed at self-directed learning, and
2) some subject matters (i.e. accounting) are not appropriate for self-directed learning.

My first concern was addressed in the works of Huey B. Long, and in the extensive research of Lucy and Paul Guglielmino with the self-directed learning readiness scale.

Long (1989, 1990, 1991) addresses the psychological aspects of SDL. Long (1989) depicts the successful self-directed learner as having the following characteristics: 1) self-confidence, 2) self-awareness, 3) self-reflectiveness, 4) a strong goal orientation, and 5) an aptitude for systematic procedures. Obviously, all adult learners do not exhibit these characteristics.

In his 1991 book chapter, entitled Challenges in the Study and Practice of Self-Directed Learning, Long presents an illustration of his model with pedagogical control on the horizontal axis and psychological control on the vertical axis (p.22). This illustration, divided into four quadrants, identifies situations where SDL is, and is not, appropriate based on the psychological make-up of the individual. It is important to note, Long (1991) prefers to speak in terms of degrees of self-direction, rather than in an all-or-nothing approach (p.15).

In a 1990 article in the International Journal of Lifelong Education, Long pointed out that the over-zealous promotion

of SDL has resulted in a primary emphasis on techniques while neglecting the psychological variable. Some people simply are not ready for SDL.

The concept of self-directed learning readiness is the focus of the work of Lucy and Paul Guglielmino. In 1977, Lucy Guglielmino developed the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale as part of her dissertation work at the University of Georgia (Guglielmino, 1978). I use the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) in my own work (including my work at GM Japan), so I will discuss this instrument at length in the Research Methodology section of this chapter.

My second concern with the "over-zealous promotion of SDL" (using Long's terms) was the use of SDL without regard to the subject matter being learned. Certain business subjects, such as accounting, seemed by nature to require the direction of a teacher. The non-accountant does not know what he/she doesn't know, or how to go about learning it. I created The Continuum of Business Education to guide my thinking about the application of SDL to business subjects. Greater learner participation (with less teacher direction) is appropriate as one moves to the right on the continuum.

FIGURE 1: The Continuum of Business Education

Teacher-Directed (Training)		Learner-Directed (Development)
Technical Skills	People Skills	Conceptual Skills
Courses	Courses	Courses
accounting	team building	leadership
finance	conflict management	strategy

Source: Beitler, M.A. (1999a).

The Continuum is only applicable once the learner has demonstrated he/she is "psychologically equipped" (Long, 1991) to succeed at SDL. Lucy Guglielmino's SDLRS instrument is designed to indicate "readiness" to engage in SDL.

The learner characteristics are addressed in the work of Long and the Guglielminos. The subject matter/environmental characteristics are addressed in my work (Beitler, 1999a). A third variable, the teacher's characteristics, must also be considered before choosing SDL. Analyzing the three variables (teacher characteristics, learner characteristics, and subject matter characteristics) is facilitated by using the following checklist:

FIGURE 2: The SDL Variables Checklist

	Teacher-Directed	Learner-Directed
1. The teacher's characteristics		
knowledge	high	low
experience	high	low
2. The learners' characteristics		
knowledge	low	high
experience	low	high
maturity level	low	high
motivation level	low	high
ability to set goals	low	high
3. The subject matter/environmental characteristics		
"block of knowledge" --defined by profession	high	low
time availability	low	high
resource availability	low	high

Circling items on the left side of the Checklist indicates a need to move to the left (teacher-directed) side of the Continuum of Business Education. Circling items on the right side of the Checklist indicates a need to move to the right (learner-directed) side of the Continuum.

A teacher with low knowledge and low experience in a particular subject matter can still serve the learning needs of

learners with high knowledge and experience, if he/she is willing to serve in the role of facilitator (instead of in the role of subject matter expert).

Obviously, the SDL Variable Checklist over-simplifies reality. It may be necessary to consider ten more continua (one for each item) to properly reflect the complexity of the particular situation. It is important not to think of learner-directed versus teacher-directed education in terms of which one is better. There is not an ideal teaching/learning method; we must think in terms of the *appropriate* method.

A limitation of my checklist is that it only provides a snapshot at a point in time. Hopefully, students will become more knowledgeable, experienced, and mature; therefore, a move toward the right side of the Continuum of Business Education is typical over time.

THE ROLE OF LEARNING CONTRACTS

For several years, I have advocated the use of learning contracts for organizations that wish to use both teacher-directed and learner-directed (SDL) education as part of their worker and manager development programs.

The writing of the learning contract is incorporated by management into its employee performance evaluation process. A list of learning and development needs is the result of the properly conducted performance evaluation process. From this "needs analysis," the manager and employee (perhaps, with the guidance of an OD or OL consultant) write a contract including the following four steps:

1. What is to learned?
2. How will it be learned?
3. How will the learning be documented?
4. How will the learning be evaluated?

The learning contract permits the customization of a learning and development plan for each employee. I published the details on writing learning contracts in a recent American Society for Training & Development article (Beitler, 1999b).

SDL & ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING

The learning contract serves another purpose as well. Learning contracts can "capture" individual learning for the benefit of the organization. If the learning contracts require documentation of learning (such as, reaction papers written after attending workshops), these documents can be posted on the company's *Intra*Net, and then later accessed by other organizational members.

Research indicates that creating an atmosphere conducive for SDL also creates an atmosphere conducive for the much-talked-about learning organization (Senge, 1990). Confessore and Kops (1998) found five characteristics reflected in both the SDL literature and in the literature on learning organizations:

1. tolerance for errors, support for experimentation and risk taking, and an emphasis on creativity and innovation;

2. the use of a participative leadership style and delegation of responsibility to organizational members;

3. support for learning initiatives that are linked to the organization's goals and values;

4. encouragement of open communication and of information systems that provide for collaboration and teamwork, and the use of both internal and external learning resources; and,

5. provision of opportunities and situations for individual learning.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

As an experienced teacher/trainer, I am comfortable assessing two of the three characteristics on The SDL Variables Checklist (see Figure 2). I am comfortable with the *teacher/trainer characteristics* because I am aware of my strengths/weaknesses and preferences as a teacher/trainer. I am also comfortable assessing the *subject matter/environmental characteristics* with the use of The Continuum of Business Education (see Figure 1). The difficult aspect of using The Checklist is accurately assessing the *learner characteristics*.

In previous studies, I have used in-depth interviews (a popular qualitative research method) to determine learner characteristics. My interview method, including the use of an interview guide, is discussed at length in one of my earlier publications (Beitler, 1998). My interview method is built upon the recommendations of Patton (1990) and Moustakas (1990), two leading authorities on qualitative research.

For quantitative data gathering, I use the Guglielmino Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS). The SDLRS, a Likert-type questionnaire with five response options, was developed and field tested by Lucy Guglielmino in 1977 as

part of her doctoral dissertation work at the University of Georgia (Guglielmino, 1978). Subsequently, the instrument was expanded to its current 58 items. The SDLRS has become the most widely-used instrument for the assessment of self-directed learning readiness (Long & Ageykum, 1988; McCune, 1989; Merriam & Brockett, 1997). The self-scorable form for the SDLRS is called the Learning Preference Assessment (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1991a, 1991b).

Based on a compilation of more than 3000 respondents to the instrument, the Pearson split-half reliability of the English version is .94 (McCune, Guglielmino, Garcia, 1990). Further discussion of the validation studies on the SDLRS can be found in Brockett and Hiemstra (1991), Delahaye and Smith (1995), and Guglielmino (1997).

For each data set, mean SDLRS scores, score ranges, standard deviation, standard error, variance, kurtosis, and skewness are calculated. Frequency distributions are calculated and histograms are developed. A one-factor ANOVA is used to compare SDLRS scores across data sets. The ANOVA results are then subjected to the Fisher PLSD, the Scheffe F-test, and the Dunnett t.

Research has suggested that individuals who have developed high self-directed learning skills tend to perform better in jobs requiring:

1. A high degree of problem-solving ability.
2. A high degree of creativity.
3. A high degree of change.

The average score for adults who complete the SDLRS is 214 (with a standard deviation of 25.59). The following scoring ranges have been established:

Low	58-176
Below average	177-201
Average	202-226
Above average	227-251
High	252-290

Persons with low or below average SDLRS scores usually prefer very structured learning options (i.e. lectures in traditional classroom settings). Persons with average SDLRS scores are likely to be successful in more independent situations, but are not fully comfortable with handling the entire process of identifying their learning needs, planning their learning, and then implementing their learning plan. Persons with above average or high SDLRS scores usually prefer to determine their own learning needs, plan their learning, and then implement their learning plan. (This does not mean the persons with above average or high SDLRS scores never choose to be in a structured learning situation. They may choose traditional courses or workshops as a part of their learning plan.)

FINDINGS

Using a quantitative research method, as well as a qualitative method, was especially helpful in this study. The data gathered by one approach helped explain the data gathered by the other.

I will begin by presenting the SDLRS scores of the Japanese managers. Then I will offer some data from other studies for comparison purposes.

Japanese Managers at GM Japan
Mean 242.9
Range 206-277

All SDLRS Adult Participants
Mean 214
Range 189-239 (one standard deviation)

University of North Carolina at Greensboro:
Undergraduate Business Students (Juniors & Seniors)
Mean 213.7
Range 178-265
MBA Students (Evening Program)
Mean 234.8
Range 205-273

The average scores of my evening MBA students and the Japanese managers at GM Japan fall into the "above average" range (227-251). Since evening MBA students typically work in management positions during the day, it is understandable that they have above average skills for self-direction.

The mean score of 242.9 for the Japanese managers was initially harder to explain. The mean for the Japanese managers was more than eight points higher than the evening MBA students. Even after removing the international students' scores (18% of the class) from the MBA scores, the mean of 234 remained.

The age and career positions of the Japanese managers and evening MBA students were quite similar. The differences between the two groups did not become clear until I reviewed the audiotapes of the interviews.

The Japanese managers (with only two exceptions for two managers who studied in the U.S.) did not major in business as undergraduates. They invariably told me that they had no career plans when they started college. The Japanese undergraduate majors included; English literature, mathematics, art, French, human science (a combination of psychology and sociology), physical geography, and geology. While they did not go into these fields for careers, it did not seem to matter. The Japanese managers chose their undergraduate majors based on what they "wanted to learn."

The Japanese managers are still actively involved in self-directed learning projects (similar to what Tough (1979) described). They are pursuing a host of non-business subjects, from diving to art appreciation. I was fascinated to learn that some Japanese companies actually pay for their managers to study these non-business subjects. One Japanese company paid for an executive to study acting in the Kno drama (an ancient form of Japanese theater). The Japanese in my study did not seem to associate "learning" with "work." They appeared to believe learning could be a form of entertainment. In American culture there is sharp distinction between learning and entertainment.

CONCLUSION

The American MBA students seemed to have a learning for sake-of-career orientation; the Japanese managers seemed to have a learning for sake-of-learning orientation. Should American companies encourage, and pay for, employees to study non-business subjects that they find interesting? Of

course, the U.S. tax system would not be supportive. (The I.R.S. probably would not see these as "necessary" business expenses.)

If we truly believe well-rounded, self-directed managers are crucial to organizational success, we will need to change our business schools and our management development programs. We must promote and reward self-directed learning, if we hope to see more of it in our organizations.

In a recent publication, Lucy and Paul Guglielmino asked the following two thought-provoking questions:

1. Do some cultures actually inhibit the development of readiness for self-directed learning in the population, while others encourage it?
2. Could it be that in the global economy nations that develop a workforce capable of learning in a more self-directed way will be more competitive in the long run? (Guglielmino & Guglielmino, 1998)

I hope that my future research will yield some insight into these two questions. I believe that the development of self-directed learning readiness is not only an issue for HR development, but that it's a strategic management issue as well.

I would like to close with a recommendation for global corporations. As your corporation seeks to develop a sustainable competitive advantage in global markets, invest in the creation of an atmosphere conducive to SDL (by rewarding it); then "capture" that individual learning for the organization's benefit through the use of learning contracts.

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